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Research Paper:

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Abstract

This article examines the role of the Internet in political participation in South Korea. It reveals that the Internet brought majority of the voters into the political process and produced a more fact-based election process in South Korea. It also reveals that Internet accessibility has become a stronger factor to explain increased voter participation. This article suggests that the rapid diffusion of Internet along with broadband connections have contributed to the increased use of Internet among young voters.

Introduction

The Internet is increasingly widely used for communication by citizens and governments in different countries and is the subject of much discussions among communication scholars (Verba & Nie, 1972; Nagel, 1987; Lijphart, 1997; Lae Park, 2002; Krueger, 2002a; 2002b). In recent years, South Korea has seen a remarkable diffusion in Internet and its impact on political communication. Over the past five years, South Korea has grown to be one of the world's most enthusiastic adopters of broadband -- the high-speed Internet connection technology that makes the Internet as ubiquitous as electricity, just as promised by technology gurus.

Driven by the government's aggressive financial support and industry-wide competition, broadband has quickly become the leading method of connecting to the Internet, spawning a new version of wired lifestyles in politics, business, education and entertainment.

In 2002 the wave of cyber electioneering and the increasingly active Internet media contributed to ushering in new paradigms for political communications in South Korean history. However, systematic study of its uses by, and effects on, voters' political participation has been somewhat limited. The latest developments and impact of Internet offer more possibilities, and services such as political activism, empowerment and voter participation look set to take off. The Internet has become the most popular way of organizing street rallies, political and otherwise -- including that of the estimated seven million South Koreans who swarmed into the streets after the stunning success of their national soccer team in the last World Cup in 2002. More recently, Internet activists mobilized massive anti-American protests across the country after two girls were accidentally killed by U.S. troops.

Whether the user is at home, at work, in a broadband room or tapping away on a mobile-phone touch pad, the most popular online game these days is tearing down the political power structure. Internet news sites such as *OhMyNews*, which takes articles from anyone and post them after checking the facts, have changed the way Koreans process information. And a last-minute online push to get young voters to the polls is credited with tipping the balance for Mr. Roh in election 2002 (*The Economist,* April 17, 2003).

With the world's highest penetration of high-speed and mobile Internet services, South Korea is at the cutting edge of technology that is transforming the political system, making it more open and democratic. It could be a preview of the shape of Western democracy using Internet.

According to recent reports, South Korea has become the most advanced online democracy on the planet with the inauguration of a president who styles himself as the first leader fully in tune with the Internet (*The Guardian*, 2003; OECD, 2002; ITU, 2001a; OECD 2001). It is a revolutionary change, and the catalyst of this change is the Internet. South Koreans call it "digital democracy" and "e-politics," and they have become the world's leaders in cyberspace campaigning. Their high-tech boom has unleashed a new form of grassroots participation by millions of "Netizens" who exploit the latest information technology to bypass the once-dominant party machines of the old system. It has been widely reported that South Korea is the most

wired country in terms of broadband (*Financial Times,* 2000; *Business Week*, 2000; *Time,* 2000) in the world.

Such developments in infrastructure and the Internet use lead to the question of whether governments have yet to realize the full benefits from Internet in citizen's political participation. In addition to potentially delivering improvements in political efficacy, some see Internet as a mass medium capable of affecting wider and deeper effects on society and even affecting the nature of democracy effectively involving younger generation in political participation. Drawing on a diverse body of literature, this paper examines the impact of the Internet on political campaign and voters' participation in South Korean election.

Literature review and theoretical background

E-mail, cell phone messages and the Web are tailor made for political communication and voter participation in the political process. According to data from a joint report from the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (IPDI) and the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggests that Internet have untapped power to influence voters in US elections (IPDI, 2002) .

The findings were culled during October and November 2002 surveys of American adults, along with a questionnaire answered by managers and communications directors for campaigns in closely contested races, and a content analysis of campaign information as it appeared on the home pages of AOL, MSN, and Yahoo. The report also draws on content analysis of 102 candidate Web sites, and IPDI's daily monitoring of the 2002 online campaigns.

Of the 46 million people that the Pew/IDPI study found to have used the Internet for political news and information — up from 33 million in 2000 — 22 percent said they went online specifically to get information about the 2002 campaign. More than one-third (34 percent) said that information they found online made them decide to vote the way they did.

More than three-quarters (79 percent) of the Internet users who sought political information in 2002 were looking for candidate records; 32 percent registered their opinions in online polls; 30 percent got information about where to vote; 10 percent participated in online discussions about the elections; and 6 percent contributed to candidates.

According to cross section studies of the American National Election Studies (ANES) the access rates have grown from 26 percent of the population in 1996 to 43 percent in 1998 to 62 percent in 2000. Moreover, interest in gaining access remains robust with more than 40 percent of those without access reporting they are likely to acquire Internet services in the near future (*The UCLA Internet Report,* 2000). Other long term demographic trends point to future increases in access rates (Nie & Erbring, 2000). Over 87 percent of those adults 30 and younger report access to the Internet compared to only 31 percent of those 65 and older, suggesting that generational replacement may dramatically increase overall access rates in the future

and might increase the political participation among the lower economic status people (CSRA, 2002).

Various researches on political participation reveal that individuals with higher socioeconomic status (SES) participate in politics more often than lower SES individuals (Verba & Nie, 1972; Nagel, 1987; Lijphart, 1997). According to Verba and others (1995), individuals with higher SES possess various resources like, wealth, education and civic skills that enable them to pay the high costs of political engagement and vice versa creating the longstanding SES participation gap (Kling, 1999; Kiesler et al., 2000).

In reality the size of the participation gap in part decides which party's candidate wins election (Radcliff, 1994; Radcliff, 1995). According to Hill and Leighley (1992) not only do participators have more say about who governs, but they also receive more policy concessions from these representatives once in office. Because this unequal participation inhibits the ability of governments to respond equally to the needs and preferences of the citizenry, and the unequal distribution of resources lies at the root of this participation gap (Verba, 1996; Lijphart, 1997).

Studies reveal that the anonymous nature of the medium allows those from lower status groups to feel more empowered in an online environment compared to analogous off-line interactions (Schwartz, 1995; Gastil, 2000). In conclusion, if individuals do not possess the traditional resources (civic skills, time, money) required for traditional participation, they may fail to engage the political system

In similar studies on the socioeconomic profile of Internet users, scholars expressed the skepticism about the ability of the medium to expand political participation to new individuals. According to Davis & Owen (1998) and Bucy (2000) the combination of higher individual resources predicting both online access and traditional political participation hampers the Internet's potential to expand the base of political participation. Other work goes even further to directly examine the profile of individuals participating in politics via the Internet. The studies done by Noris (1999), Solop (2000) confirm that those participating in politics online come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the population at large.

Because the Internet enables new forms of communication as well as eases information gathering, some suggest that the Internet could radically transform patterns of political participation in the United States and other parts of the world by opening up new participatory avenues (Dertouzos, 1997).

Sproull and Kiesler (1995) revealed that Internet communication affects the way participants reacted to the relative status of others in the group. In face-to-face situations, people use more formal language, tend to defer to higher status members and they agree with their decisions. Higher status members tend to talk more and take the lead in discussions, influencing the agenda and the decisions reached. The research established that this situation was leveled out by Internet discussions. Higher status and lower status members had a more equal contribution to make both in terms of the amount of talking and their influence on outcomes. They also express more opinions and ideas, and vent more emotion. (Anderson et al., 1995; Bimber, 2000; NTIA, 2000; CSRA 2002; *New Statesman*, 2000).

If the results of this research are combined with the fact that most people on the Internet are not normally aware of each others' status, and that certainly there are no visible reminders such as color, sex, dress, height, age etc, which means that Internet discussions could produce communication that is more democratic and open.

The research revealed that using a network helped people to talk more frankly including heated argument. It also found that people had a more equal share of the conversation on the Internet instead of one or two people dominating as in physical meetings. They generated more proposals using email than using face-to-face meetings.

It is important to remember that the issues surrounding sociological effects are profound, precisely because the Internet does not exist independently of the cultural and political environments in which its users live. An Internet user does not become removed from their socio-political underpinnings when they go online. They are still living in a family, a political regime, a society, in an economic situation, a region and so on, interacting with others with different or similar circumstances

With the time enhancing features of the Internet (Delli Carpini, 2000; Best et al., 2001), the need to have free time in order to act politically may be reduced. Physical resources, most notably the speed at which individuals connect to the Internet, may dramatically increase the likelihood of online engagement while scarcely impacting on off-line activities (NTIA, 2000; Leigh & Atkinson, 2001). Further, traditional civic skills, which promote the effective navigation of the off-line political world, may not similarly facilitate online political participation. Instead, individuals may rely on new online skills to overcome the medium specific obstacles associated with online participation (Krueger, 2002).

Finally, given the amount of attention by scholars to the negative democratic ramifications of the class bias in participation (Lijphart, 1997), conceivably the most interesting aspect of the Internet is its potential to act as a social leveler. Certainly, donating money online should require the same financial resources as donating offline. Yet, the political advantages of higher income transcend the simple ability to donate and use money directly for political ends (Sanders, 1997). Those from higher income groups are advantaged during social interactions, especially when interacting in public forums. This is one reason why those from lower socioeconomic groups find it difficult to participate fully in public forums such as civic organizations where they may develop civic skills. It is unclear whether this advantage remains in the online environment.

Any examination of the Internet's effects on society must take this into account, to explore its full potential. By drawing on a different set of resources, the same individuals may not be disadvantaged online, thereby potentially expanding the scope of those participating in politics. This study seeks to deepen the understanding of how Internet influences the patterns of political participation in South Korea.

Methods

This research is based exclusively on secondary data and a quantitative aggregation of many research findings and their interpretation of the role of the Internet in

political participation. The Lexis-Nexis electronic database, which included national and international newspaper articles, professional journal articles, OECD, Korea Internet Information Center, Korean Press Foundation and South Korean government database were the main sources of this article. Following in the tenets of the constant comparative method, documents were examined and analyzed using a quantitative, holistic approach aimed at discerning the themes of the study. However, in keeping with the rigor required of qualitative methodology, great care and time was taken to thoroughly examine each document to assure that the categories and theories that developed were right interpretations (Lindlof, 1995) of the Internet use in the political participation.

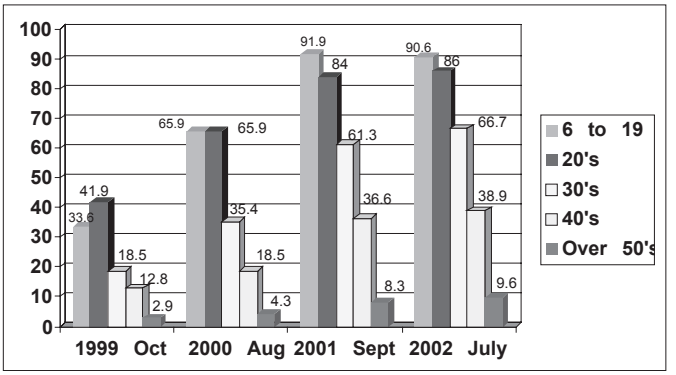
Discussion and analysis

Internet Penetration in South Korea

According to a recent survey by KoreanClick (2003), which specializes in Internet market research, the number of Internet users in Korea reached 25.73 million, or 67.4 percent of the population aged between 10 and 65 (Figure 1). According to Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC, 2001), Korea ranked fifth in the world with 403 internet users per 1000 persons in 2000.

By the end of June 2002, the rate of number of Internet users over fifty years old was 9.6%. Over 38.9% Internet users were in their forties and 66.7% were in their thirties. More than 86% young adults in their twenties used the Internet and children aged six to nineteen were 90.6%.

Figure 1: Internet Penetration South Korea, June 2002, Unit % Source: KRNIC, Korea Network Information Center



The age group from six to 19 had the most Internet users compared to other age groups. Young adults in their twenties had the highest rate of Internet usage. However, compared with the rates in August 2000, the growth rates are as follows: 5.3% percent increase for people over fifty, 31.3% percent increase for people in their thirties, and 20.4% percent increase for users in their forties (KRNIC, 2002). There was a 20.1% percent increase and 24.7% percent increase for people in their twenties

and the six to nineteen year old age bracket respectively. This shows a rapid increase in Internet users who are over twenty and thirty.

The survey by KoreanClick (2003) also found that an Internet user spent an average of 14.4 hours a week surfing the Web, up 54 minutes from the previous year. The proportion of female Internet users stood at 44.6 percent, posting a slight rise from the 44 percent recorded a year ago. Internet use among housewives made a huge jump to 49.4 percent from 37.3 percent last year. Internet surfing time averaged 14.4 hours per week, up 0.9 hours (54 minutes) from the previous year.

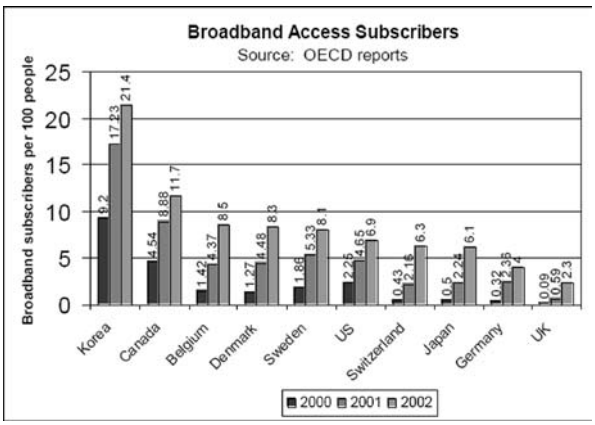
Most respondents (88.2 percent) used the Internet to surf for information. E-mail came next with 79.2 percent followed by Internet games (62.2 percent), movies and music (61.5 percent), news (53.8 percent), and online shopping (42.4 percent). Users of Internet messenger programs, an emerging communication method, were 42.6 percent of total respondents, a sharp hike from the 2002 record of 27.5 percent (KRNIC, 2003, CNN Staff and Wires, 2002, December 18).

Instant messaging is also gaining popularity rapidly, with a number of corporations utilizing the new real-time communications tool. More than 42 percent of respondents said they routinely use instant messaging, up from 27.5 percent a year earlier (Korea Herald, 2003).

Factors contributing to increased internet use

A recent OECD (Ismail & Wu., 2003; Evans 2001) report reveals that South Korea has the highest adoption rate of broadband in the world with 11.3 million broadband subscribers in a population of 48 million, and with 85 percent of new subscribers opting for broadband. According to Legard (2003), South Korea plans to build a nationwide Internet access infrastructure capable of speeds between 50M bps (bits per second) and 100M bps by 2010.

Figure 2. Overview of Broadband Access: Subscribers for broadband access services, 2000-2002. OECED Report 2003.



Broadband connections grant users faster access to Internet services at a flat monthly fee. Armed with ready access to the bandwidth needed to support online video and audio content, 73.9 percent of Korea's Web surfers accessed streaming video and audio content in a month. In contrast, only 29.5 percent of the surfing population in the U.S. access streaming media content (Ismail and Wu., 2003; Evans 2001).

As far as social infrastructure is concerned, most South Koreans live in densely populated urban high-rise buildings. Thus, it was relatively easy to do the wiring and infrastructure development. A young and tech-hungry population has helped, as has the government's keenness to promote the Internet. Around 70% of Korean households live in urban areas, and that 45% of them live in apartment blocks. That has enabled Korean telecoms firms to offer broadband services to over 90% of households within a few years, a world record.

Internet users and participation in election campaigns

Online campaigns have swung the presidential election, stirred tens of thousands into anti-US protests and nudged government policy on the nuclear standoff. The younger generation gets all their information from the web. Some don't even bother with TVs (Watts, 2003). The voice of this New Korea is *OhmyNews*, an Internet newspaper, arguably the world's most domestically powerful news site, which has built up almost as big a readership and as fearsome a reputation for moving public opinion as the Sun.

*"The development of **internet** technology has changed the whole political dynamic in South Korea to an extent that the outside world has not yet grasped," said Yoon Yong-kwan, the head of foreign policy formulation in Mr. Roh's transitional team."* (Quoted by Jonathan Watts, *The Guardian,* Feb 24, 2003)

Polls showed that the victory in December 2002 of Mr. Roh - who claims to be the world's first president to understand HTML website coding - came from a huge surge of support from twenty- and thirty-years old generation. In South Korea, where elections are usually decided by regional rather than generational loyalties, this was a dramatic development.

In 2000 parliamentary election, Internet emerged as a powerful political tool in South Korea. The Internet played an instrumental role in the defeat of 58 candidates. According to Taik Sup, (2000) the Internet has proven itself to be an effective tool of campaign in Korean politics. In the election campaign, the Internet was used to bypass a timid mainstream media and published what proved to be damning and crucial information about the records of some parliamentary candidates. The Web also became a virtual Speakers' Corner for free political expression, usually exercised warily in South Korea by a populace that was under dictatorial control for more than three decades (Struck, 2002). And it was the catalyst for organizing hundreds of grassroots citizens groups into a powerful national force.

Political websites helped create a culture where people could debate and express their opinion. For example, a civic activist group called *Umbrella Citizen Group*

was formed with the cooperation of about 600 individual groups. The group set up a Web server, borrowed half of a dozen personal computers from their respective organizations and created a Web site bulging with information about the candidates. The group pressed the election commission to release criminal records and other pertinent material. Rather than do so on the civic group's site, the commission published the material on its own site. But *Civic Groups Web Operation* published candidates' serious criminal records, list of tax evaders or draft dodgers list on the web. They published a "black list" of 86 "unfit" candidates on the Internet site, complete with pages of details and background. It was the first in the history of Korean politics that the candidates had been so nakedly exposed. Fifty-eight of the 86 candidates lost, including several political heavyweights.

The National Election Commission conceded that Internet impact on the Korean politics was explosive and mobilized the people towards political participation (Struck, 2000). The response was beyond any one's imagination. According to the election commission the Civic group's site was popular, and on election day it registered 1.1 million visitors seeking political information.

The citizens group campaign turned out to be the only clear winner in the election, in which voters kept a split parliament and no party achieved a majority. The opposition Grand National Party won 133 of the 273 seats, and former President Kim Dae Jung's Millennium Democratic Party won 115. As a result the main political parties had to form coalitions based on the issues at hand. This was the first election where the use of the Internet had been so widespread in Korea.

Two years later in the December 2002 presidential elections featured on an online battle between animated websites set up by young journalists close to reformist candidate Roh Moo-hyun and major newspapers such as the right-wing daily Chosun Ilbo. Roh's victory was helped by support from sites such as OhmyNews, which got 20 million visitors a day during the campaign (Korean Press Foundation 2003).

The winning candidate had little need for mass rallies or traditional media campaign tactics (York 2002). When candidate Roh Moo-hyun's organizers wanted supporters to vote on election day, they simply pressed a few computer keys. Text messages flashed to the cell phones of almost 800,000 people, urging them to go to the polls (*The Globe and Mail*, December 30, 2002). During his campaign, millions of voters absorbed Mr. Roh's message from Internet sites that featured video clips of the candidate and audio broadcasts by disc jockeys and rock stars. Half a million visitors logged on to his main Web site every day to donate money or obtain campaign updates. More than 7,000 voters a day sent him e-mails with policy ideas. Internet chat groups buzzed with debate on the election.

Until a year ago, Mr. Roh was best known for his repeated failures to be elected to parliament. Self-educated, he came from a poor family and had been jailed for helping dissidents fight the military regimes of the past. But young voters admired the lawyer for his integrity and his image as an independent outsider, and they formed an Internet fan club to promote his future.

The fan club, with 70,000 members, helped launch what has been called "the Roh typhoon." Its energetic activism was crucial to Mr. Roh's triumph in last spring's

primaries, when he shocked most observers by capturing the presidential nomination of the ruling party. And it was a crucial factor in his narrow victory.

"It was like a fan club for a movie star," said Sonn Hochul, a political scientist at Sogang University in Seoul. "The Roh phenomenon was based on the Internet. It's a new form of political participation, and it has educated young people about politics. This was an Internet election." (Quoted by Jonathan Watts, *The Guardian*, Feb 24, 2003)

The Internet allowed Mr. Roh to liberate himself from "black money" -- corporate donations that are South Korea's traditional form of campaign financing. Largely through Internet-based campaign groups, Mr. Roh raised millions from more than 180,000 individual donors.

South Korea's 35 million voters (70.2%) hit the polls in 2002 presidential election (*CNN.Com/Technology*, 2002). And for many of those voters, the trip to the ballot box started with a click of the mouse. That is because the Web has loomed large in this year's presidential race, with campaigners pushing online video and animation clips to court a critical audience. Millennium Democratic Party website's biggest objective was to develop a campaign method of listening to Netizens through the Internet, which has been very successful and meaningful in attracting voters.

Almost half of South Korean voters are below the age of 40 -- a prime demographic for users of the Internet and cell phones. Until 2000, many were apathetic politically, put off by the country's traditional political machinery. But Mr. Roh reached out to voters with one of the world's most sophisticated Internet campaigns, and the vast majority of the younger population voted for him.

According to a survey by the Korea Network Information Center (2003), 86 percent of the population of their 20s log onto the Internet every day. The figure is 67 percent for those in their 30s and just 39 percent for those in their 40s (Han-sun, 2003).

CNN (2002) reported that more than 400,000 daily visitors hit the MDP's website during the election campaign. Clicking for votes has become the way to tap a critical audience -- young voters (age under 40). Younger voter survey by Reuters indicates that young people like to lead comfortable lives. So they would rather use the Internet at home than attend rallies. In that sense, the Internet is a very important tool to check and share information on candidates or parties in South Korea (CNN and *Reuters*, 2002). Although Mr. Roh mastered the Internet, he and other major political parties used it along with other traditional media. The parties held an average of only three rallies a day, compared to 49 a day during the 1997 campaign. Campaigning with loudspeakers on the streets is much less common this time because of extensive Internet use.

Lessons learnt

The South Korean election documents two major developments in online politics. The first is the emergence of e-mail as a mainstream channel of political communication. E-mail and text messages on the cell phones have become increasingly popular and potent tools for campaigners in Korea. Two-thirds of politically engaged Internet users during the 2002 election cycle sent or received

email related to the campaign. The second breakthrough success concerns interest-group Web sites, with 73% of those who use the Internet for politics in previous year saying they checked such organization sites for information.

It is also can be learned that online political activities successfully demonstrated a new form of civic political movement as people's desire for democratization has converged on the Internet. Factors such as high rate of Internet accessibility, high speed connections, and diverse political content with quality presentation in a different format have generated enthusiasm of political participation among the voters.

Conclusion

In terms of our original questions, it indicates that the Internet has truly become an effective tool in helping ordinary citizens to easily and voluntarily participate in South Korean election. It also reveals that the online world is offering a new public space for political engagement among those who might not have been otherwise active, particularly the young. Unlike the past when enthusiastic Internet users were mostly limited to an age ineligible to vote, voters in the older age groups are slowly joining the fray and engaging in online activities related to the election.

This study also found a pattern of cause and effect between the positive trend of Internet use in political participation and more stringent election laws, changes in voters' attitudes and the increasingly wider use of Internet. Websites of different candidates presented varieties of information in different format –t ext, audio, video and graphics, help equip young generation make decision on who to vote.

The plentiful online political information is much meaningful to younger generation in South Korea to make decisions. The relevance of the Internet is part of the generational and ideological shift of the voting population in Korea. The chat rooms in Korea are buzzing with debate. The decentralized, online discussion is as influential in South Korea as western world's mainstream media in election coverage.

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